

## Shelley as an Atheist

Muna Shrestha<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, Dept. of English  
Nepalgunga Multiple Campus

Of the major Romantic writers, Percy Bysshe Shelley is most readily associated with atheism. He and a friend by the name of Thomas Jefferson Hogg, were expelled from Oxford for writing *The Necessity of Atheism*. This book is much less rebellious than its title suggests. Its strongest rhetoric underscores the necessity of being able to argue even about God. Shelley's antagonism towards established Christianity arose primarily from his opposition to the institution of marriage. He believes that it is immoral for a man and woman who have ceased to love each other to remain married, and he thinks that Christianity has, from its earliest time, given priority to the perils of sin over the rewards of love. Shelley's atheism, seen in the context of British Romantic period when the state treated blasphemy and atheism as politically subversive and hence punitive actions, appears quite radical.

Shelley's early profession of atheism, when he was still a student, led to his expulsion from Oxford. He was also branded as a radical agitator and thinker. He was marginalized and ostracized from the intellectual and political circles of his time. Though Shelley's literary output remained steady throughout his life, most publishers and journals declined to publish his work for the fear of being arrested on the charges of blasphemy or sedition. He could have been reinstated with the intervention of his father, but this would have required his disavowing of the treatise— *The Necessity of Atheism*— and professing of allegiance to Christianity.

Like many atheists, Shelley used the word "God" in a metaphorical sense. God was the "personification of ideals"—the enduring human quest for beauty, truth, love, freedom, wisdom, joy" (Solan). God was also the universe or the totality of natural phenomena. But God is neither the Jupiter who sends rain upon the earth; nor the Venus through whom all living things are produced; nor the Vulcan who presides over the terrestrial element of fire; nor the Vesta that preserves the light which is enshrined in the sun, the moon, and the stars. He is neither the Proteus, nor the Pan of the material world. But the word 'God' unites all the attributes which these denominations contain and is the (inter-point) and over-ruling spirit of all the energy and wisdom included within the circle of existing things. Shelley's views were fairly orthodox up to the time of his going to Oxford. *Zastrozzi*, printed in 1810, contains a bitter attack on atheism: and in a letter to Stockdale Shelley disclaims any intention of advocating atheism in *The Wandering Jew*.

The question whether Shelley was an atheist or not must not be decided on one or two extracts from his writings or even on any one work. True he argues against theism, but to call him an atheist on that account will be as illogical as the argument that St. Thomas was an atheist because he advanced objections against the existence of God. One reason for the opinion that Shelley is an atheist lies in the fact that he had a conception of the Deity which differed from the Puritanical one then in vogue. When he attempted to show the nonexistence of God his negation was directed against the notions of God which exhibited Him as a Being with human passions, as an autocratic tyrant. In his letter to Lord Ellenborough, Shelley writes:

To attribute moral qualities to the spirit of the universe ... is to degrade God into man." He denied the existence of the God represented as "a venerable old man, seated on a throne of clouds, His breast the theater of various passions analogous to those of humanity, His will changeable and uncertain as that of an earthly king. (qtd. in McDonald)

From his early reading of anti-Christian authors and from his own experience of the reactionary and intolerant character of early nineteenth-century Christianity, Shelley had come to entertain certain moral objections to the Christian religion. These would have remained obstacles to his reconciliation with his ancestral creed regardless of what metaphysical views he later embraced. He was willing, as a sceptic, to accept as much of the Christian religion as was free from his moral objections to it. But the qualification included too much of the Christian religion to allow any real departure from his original unfavorable attitude. The references to 'God' in his later poems— which suggest to some critics that the poet was becoming more orthodox in his religious opinions – probably refer to the deity whom he thought Christ worshipped: a mysterious and inconceivable being, differing from man and the mind of man. Shelley's acceptance of God in this sense in no way contradicts his continued strictures against the Christian religion. (Natarajan)

Three months before his death Shelley expressed his views with regard to Christianity as follows: "I differ with Moore in thinking Christianity useful to the world; no man of sense can think it true.... I agree with him that the doctrines of the French and material philosophy are as false as they are pernicious; but still they are better than Christianity, inasmuch as anarchy is better than despotism; for this reason, that the former is for a season, and the latter is eternal."

Three poems, Prometheus Unbound, "Mont Blanc," and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" best present his philosophical and religious beliefs. Had Prometheus appeared in a work by any other writer, his self-sacrifice and his intercession before the gods on behalf of man would have made him a Christ figure. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" has obvious parallels to Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality," Coleridge's "[Dejection](#)," and Keats's "[Ode on a Grecian Urn](#)," but differs from them primarily in Shelley's assumption of the existence of an "unseen power," the "Spirit of Beauty" whose light alone "gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream." This lyric hymn, written in 1816, is Shelley's earliest focused attempt to incorporate the Romantic ideal of communion with nature into his own aesthetic philosophy. Of course Shelley's atheism is a famous part of his philosophical stance, so it may seem strange that he has written a hymn of any kind. He addresses that strangeness when he declares that names such as "Demon, Ghost, and Heaven" are merely the record of attempts by sages to explain the effect of the Spirit of Beauty--but that the effect has never been explained by any "voice from some sublime world." The Spirit of Beauty that the poet worships is not supernatural; it is a part of the world. It is not an independent entity; it is a responsive capability within the poet's own mind.

Shelley has two versions of the origin of good and evil. The first is Manichean and represents them as twin genii of balanced power and opposite tendencies ruling the world. "This much is certain: that Jesus Christ represents God as the fountain of all goodness, the eternal enemy of pain and evil.... According to Jesus Christ, and according to the indisputable facts of the case, some evil spirit has dominion in this imperfect world" (Percy Bysshe Shelley Quote). Good is represented by the morning star and evil by a comet. According to the second version, which is Shelley's own view, evil has not the same power that good has, and came later into the world. Evil is strong because man permits it to exist, and must disappear as soon as man wills this. Since it could be entirely eliminated, it is not an integral part of the world.

Shelley does not believe in the existence of hell. He thinks that this doctrine is incompatible with the goodness of God:

Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, that ye may be the sons of your Heavenly Father,  
Who makes the sun to shine on the good and the evil, and the rain to fall on the just and unjust.  
How monstrous a calumny has not impostors dared to advance against the mild and gentle author

of this just sentiment, and against the whole tenor of his doctrines and his life overflowing with benevolence and forbearance and compassion. (Essay on Christianity)

Summing up, God, according to Shelley, would only be gratifying his revenge under pretence of satisfying justice were he to inflict pain upon another for no better reason than that he deserved it. Rejecting such a God is justified in Shelley's view.

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